

Graduating mom says 'I am capable'

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Michelle Mendoza plays with her son, Robbie, at his childcare home.

Michelle Mendoza had to grow up quickly.

The 17-year-old Highland Park High School student had a baby when she was 15 years old. "This is real," Mendoza said. "He's going to be in my life for the rest of my life. I'm going to have to do this tomorrow night and the day after and the day after." So Mendoza said it will be a personal victory when she walks across the Ravinia stage at her graduation ceremony Tuesday, June 2 with hundreds of her classmates. Parents and families will clap with pride, but she will have an especially small voice in the crowd cheering her on—her 2 year-old-son, Robbie. When Mendoza discovered she was pregnant, Highland Park High School counselors recommended her for a scholarship from the Highland Park/Highwood Home Child Care Association.

She will be the first student to carry that scholarship for child care with her to college. After one particular night with little sleep with her newborn, Robbie, her mother came in to check on her. She said it was almost as if her mother sensed her panic. "It just really hit me and I don't know if I can do this," Mendoza said she told her mother, who was standing in the doorway. "She goes, 'There is no way you're not going back to school. There's no way you're not going to finish school.'"

So Mendoza continued with the daily grind. Before she got her driver's license, her mother helped her transport Robbie to and from child care. After she turned 16, Mendoza picked up the duties herself in addition to balancing schoolwork and caring for him at home. "Everybody was rooting for me," she said. "I can't let anybody down. I have to try my hardest. Maybe I'll have huge dark circles under my eyes from being sleep deprived, but I'll finish high school to the best of my abilities."

The child care association that gave Mendoza the scholarship is a non-profit that facilitates safe, licensed and enriching childcare for adults and teens in the community. "We have never turned down anybody who needed help," said Carol Brusslan, vice chairwoman of the association. "When we've had more requests than we had a little pot of money for, we've gone to more people to try to get it."

Speaking out

Mendoza lives with her parents and brother, who she says provided emotional and physical support to her as she continued her studies with a new baby. "My mom was up with me every time I had to feed him, every three hours when he came from the hospital," Mendoza said. Mendoza said her family, and her mother in particular, pushed her to finish school. Mendoza had all As on her last report card. "This year, I wanted to try my absolute hardest to prove to myself that I can get these kind of grades," she said. "That I am capable of being this kind of student."

Mendoza said despite all of the support she received, life at school wasn't always easy. "There are some of my friends that were so supportive and continue to be supportive to this day," Mendoza said. But she said there were certain people that became her friends while she was pregnant, just to get gossip out of her. "It was difficult because in such a North Shore area, you don't see that every day," Mendoza said. "And for someone to walk around with this belly, and, literally, everyone is whispering, 'Oh my gosh, look at that.' It's really hard."

When she was pregnant, she said it was hard to be the strong person she considered herself to be. "So many people were wondering things, making up assumptions—and without even asking me," she said. Instead of resigning to social misconceptions, Mendoza decided to speak out. Mendoza proposed the idea of speaking to students to school social worker, Katie Wynhoff, who runs the teen mother support group. She said she didn't want another teen to have to do this. "It's really hard to raise a child in high school," Mendoza said. "And it's a huge change that I don't think a lot of freshman are prepared for."

Mendoza did presentations a couple of times for freshman classes. At one presentation, a student asked when she has time to see her friends. "When we're in these walls of Highland Park, when we're at school," Mendoza said she responded to the student. "I don't think that there's every really a day when I'm just a teenager, because in reality, I'm not just a teenager. "I'm a teenager, and I have a child, so that changes my aspects on a lot of things." Mendoza also spoke on a panel this spring to 1,000 students during two school assemblies aimed

at combating bullying. "She's been able to embrace this in a very, very positive way," said her guidance counselor, David Bene. "She's figured out a way to be a student and be a mother."

A model program

When Mendoza left school on maternity leave, the high school became active in her absence. Bene would call to check in and make sure her work got done. "He's amazing," Mendoza said. Mendoza received home-bound instruction from tutors during her time away. "I think there's a relationship that's built up with counselors over four years," Bene said. "And sometimes better than others. I think this was a situation where it was helpful." Bene helped to connect Mendoza with the childcare association, and Robbie's care was arranged by the time she went back to school. Bene said Highland Park High School has a better counselor-to-student ratio than other schools might, which allows for more personal attention. "It's not one person who has to serve all people and be all things to all people," he said. "We have a drop-in center here, and for some student that's a wonderful place to go and to be heard."

The drop-in center is the school's counseling touchstone and can often mean a needed support network for students such as Mendoza. Mendoza used the center's resources and joined a support group provided by the center for pregnant teens. Alesia Margetis, counselor and drop-in center coordinator, said the group for young mothers has been around for five years. "It's for students who are pregnant; it's also for students who are young mothers," Margetis said. "So, the kids who are pregnant get to learn from the young mothers, as they try to negotiate what it's like to have a child and manage to go to school and deal with other issues." Bene said other schools have modeled programs from Highland Park's drop-in center.

The center is open all day on weekdays and is staffed by multiple veteran school staff, counselors who run support groups, school psychologists, social workers and interns as well as a social worker from Jewish Child and Family Services. "Highland Park is the only school that's had it for a number of years," Margetis, said. Niles West High School has a drop-in center that's only open during lunch periods. Highland Park's center runs 29 support groups throughout the week and serves about 225 students, not counting the students that walk in for crisis-intervention or just to hang out. "They don't feel comfortable anywhere else in the building, so that's become their home," Margetis said. When Counseling Department Chair Pat Cannon founded the center about 20 years ago, she said it was under the radar, and to some degree, still is. She said the program originated to address the needs of post-hospitalized students, or those who were out of school for psychiatric or substance abuse reasons, to help transition them back into school.

A warm environment

Wynhoff said she works closely with the Highland Park/Highwood Home Child Care Association and recommends students who might be in need of their scholarship program. "For an organization to say, 'We realize you have a need, and we want to invest in you and your child and allow us to help you,' that's a pretty cool thing," Bene said. The association formed as a result of a United Way assessment in the mid-1990s when the City of Highland Park asked a group of early childhood educators to address the lack of infant and toddler care for families in the area. Chair and founder Marilyn Straus said there weren't facilities available for younger children and infants. Straus gathered four other early childhood educators and later formed the association. Thirteen years later, the association facilitates care for about 50 children and about 10 childcare providers.

"Six high school girls have graduated and their children have come through the program," Brusslan said. The association's scholarship program makes up the cost difference between the state allowance for low-income families and the rate for home childcare in the Highland Park-Highwood area. "There's a substantial difference between the state allowance and what childcare providers charge in Highland Park," Brusslan said. Brusslan said the YWCA and the teen mother chips in, too, but it doesn't cover all the costs. When Straus began planning the association, she said she knew she wanted homes and not centers.

Jane Talesnick, an association coordinator and childcare provider, said a home environment makes a difference. "Instead of going into an institution, they were going into another person's home," Talesnick said. "The ratio is lower in home childcare by law than it is in centers. The ratio is lower, and the environment is warmer."

Looking forward

Mendoza expressed jitters about starting college in the fall. This summer she plans to work at a summer camp in Northbrook and will be attending Northeastern Illinois University in the fall. Mendoza is the first person in her family to attend a four-year university, and she plans to study special education. She said she always knew she wanted to be a teacher. "I've had so many teachers help me in ways that I'll never be able to thank them," Mendoza said. "And just to be able to do that with a student is amazing."

Mendoza said as she approaches graduation, it feels "surreal." "I don't think I'm actually going to feel like a graduate until I have the cap and gown on, until I'm at the ceremony, taking pictures with my friends, teachers," she said. "But I just feel like it's such an accomplishment."

—Blair Chavis | Triblocal.com reporter